Parodic Attunement: Contesting Gender Categories through Kierkegaard’s Knight of Faith and Butler’s Allegorical Usage of Drag

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Parodic Attunement:

Contesting Gender Categories through Kierkegaard’s Knight of Faith and Butler’s Allegorical Usage of Drag

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Senior Thesis in Philosophy

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Abstract

What does it mean to appear under a gender identity that fails to convey who you really are? Is it possible to truly be free from prevailing identities even as one contests them? Søren Kierkegaard’s knight of faith and Judith Butler’s allegorical usage of drag may offer clues to re-thinking how our self-conceptions undergo crisis even as they get reproduced. Instead of being entrapped within a particular identity category, the knight of faith and the drag performer show us ways to negotiate established ethical or gender categories through a “parodic attunement”. Is Kierkegaard attempting to bring us into harmony with established standards or is he pointing to a way of being beyond that? In this thesis, I contend that reading Kierkegaard’s knight of faith in conjunction with Butler’s allegorical usage of drag points us toward an engagement with the limits of given categories that allows us to see how imitation and repetition do not merely extend prevailing norms and power structures, but subvert their stability through a parodic play. Through this comparison of the knight of faith and the drag performer, I explore an intervention in the way we think of the deployment of gender identity categories.
Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The documentary film, *Paris is Burning*, provides us with a glimpse into the New York Ballroom scene of the 1980s. The ballroom community was created by Black and Latin artists and performers. Many of these participants identified themselves as trans women, trans men, gay men, lesbian women, and other identifications that do not fit within the heterosexual frame.

When I first watched this film, I hastily critiqued the idea of “realness” which was used to measure how well the performers conformed to the dominant representation of the figure they were performing. In the film, Dorian Corey says that “the idea of realness is to look as much as possible like your straight counterpart” (*Paris is Burning* 19:15-19:22). I read this standard of “realness” as a reproduction of cis-heteronormativity within the queer community. I interpreted the performances, showcased within the film, as evidence for how we are not inclined to think and act outside of restrictive gender/sexual categories. These performances, for me at the time, were solely re-idealizing heterosexual and cisgender norms without calling them into question.

My initial structuralist interpretation of this film assimilated these performances in support of and into the logic of hetero-gender norms. Dominant gender norms and representations are without a doubt idealized by the performers in this film. However, is it possible to make legible how resistance to these norms can take form in ways that are not so overt? This question lead me to think of how parodic reproductions of dominant gender representations do not merely reinscribe and solidify dominant gender norms and structures. Instead, it is through a critical repetition of these conventions that one potentially sees a disruption in the clean reproduction of dominant understandings of gender. In this thesis, I contend that reading Kierkegaard’s knight of faith in conjunction with Butler’s allegorical usage
of drag points us toward an engagement with the limits of given categories that allows us to see how imitation and repetition do not merely extend prevailing norms and power structures, but subvert their stability through a parodic play.

**Why Søren Kierkegaard?**

When beginning a project on Søren Kierkegaard, I came up against a wall. I asked myself, “what relevance does Kierkegaard even have to gender studies?” and “would Kierkegaard’s seemingly individualist stances run contrary to a collective contestation of given gender norms?”. Individualist interpretations of Kierkegaard’s authorship may view these texts as valorizing a highly individualized autonomous mode of being that exceeds the relational world. Theodor W. Adorno’s *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, presents us with a critique of the individualist and bourgeois tendencies of Kierkegaard’s authorship. In this text, Adorno critiques Kierkegaard’s narrow focus toward the inwardness that solely directs us toward God and leaves us neglectful of the human relations around us (Adorno 27-30). Kierkegaard’s seemingly narrow focus on inwardness and individuality is especially apparent in the knight of faith when Kierkegaard describes this figure as the one “who walks the narrow path of faith [who] no one can advise, no one understand” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 95). The inability to comprehend the knight of faith within one’s given terms may paint this figure as one that completely leaves the earthly and the ethical. This interpretation that highlights Kierkegaard’s individualistic tendencies may show how his religious mode is calling for a life of solitude that solely orients oneself toward God and disconnects us from our world of human relations.
However, throughout this paper, I argue that Kierkegaard and his authorship bring us to struggle with restrictive notions of the human being that are sustained and embedded by various forms of prejudice. Although Kierkegaard tends to focus on inward reflection, his work still remains involved in the political situation of Denmark. In *The Present Age*, Kierkegaard presents us with a critique of the totalizing power of public opinion. He describes modernity as “a sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence” (*Kierkegaard The Age of Revolution and the Present Age* VIII 65). The figure of the public suppresses the passion of the individual that brings oneself to exceed their current and complacent state. In the present age that Kierkegaard describes, even when the individual begins to rebel, her rebellion is quickly suppressed. Here, Kierkegaard valorizes the passion of the individual in contrast to the suppressive forces of the Public. Despite the individualism that can be interpreted from this text, there is also something to be valued here. This same passage points us to a confrontation with restrictive norms that attempt to repress ways of being that do not conform to the ideals of the public realm.

The anxiety and tension in Kierkegaard’s work can be applied in the struggle for a world that is safe for difference. Kierkegaard defines anxiety as “freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility” (*Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety* 51). Here, anxiety is not narrowly defined as pathological or limiting. Instead, it is an experience of freedom that exceeds the finite world. This is in contrast to Alison Brown’s definition of a pathological notion of anxiety as a “psychological state of fragmentation” and one in which the individual is divided between their present and future in ways that make them uneasy (*Brown 66*). Certainly, Kierkegaardian anxiety can be uneasy and uncomfortable. However, Kierkegaard offers us with a notion of anxiety that
begins with a state of child-like wonder. He notes that when “we observe children, we find the anxiety definitely intimated as a seeking after the adventurous, the prodigious, and the mysterious” (Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety 51). This state of wholeness or innocence gradually “opens up into increasingly imaginable possibilities” (Brown 66). Here, we can see that anxiety does not necessarily cause withdrawal from the world, but an orientation toward and negotiation with it. With this, one is confronted with the agency to interact and negotiate with her given world. René Rosfort claims that Kierkegaardian anxiety exposes the individual to “find their unique expression of freedom” (Rosfort, “Challenging Identity” 17). By understanding Kierkegaard’s account of anxiety as one that presents the person with agency, anxiety can become a productive force that pushes for more inclusive frames of human recognition and new ways of being human.

Here, anxiety is not solely restrictive, but can work as a productive force that helps one overcome the many challenges of life: “Anyone formed by anxiety is shaped by possibility, and only the person shaped by possibility is cultivated according to his infinitude” and is able to grasp “the terrifying just as well as the smiling” (Kierkegaard The Concept of Anxiety 188-189). By coming into this freedom that we face as human persons, we are presented with a responsibility to act and participate in a world that inevitably confronts and disturbs our stabilized notions of oneself and the bodies around us. In our contact with the other, anxiety is unavoidable. It is through this contact with the other that “despite one’s efforts, one is undone” (Butler, Undoing Gender 19). Despite attempts to disentangle and distance myself from the other, I am necessarily confronted “with existential differences or ways of living that I do not like or that I am even repulsed by” (Rosfort, “Sacrificing Gender” 349). While the
interdependences of our lives often create conflict and aversion, this confrontation with others does not necessarily need to be suppressed. Although Trịnh Thิ Minh Hà is not specifically speaking about Kierkegaard, this confrontation can be seen as “a way of living with differences without turning them into opposites, nor trying to assimilate them out of insecurity” (Trịnh 71-72). Kierkegaardian anxiety offers us with an opportunity to turn this confrontation with norms into a site that allows for hybrid and entangled ways of being.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard’s notion of anxiety does not rest at the point of ethical recognition. Kierkegaard’s step into the religious mode potentially offers us with new ways of understanding the contested status of what is knowable and possible. Anxiety formed through Kierkegaard’s understanding of faith as “the inner certainty that anticipates infinity” allows the person to pass through this anxiety and enter into an alternative mode of being in the world (Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety 191). Kierkegaard terms this as a passionate faith that comes about when one exceeds the ethical world and “emerges at the very limits of what is knowable” (Butler, Senses of the Subject 122). Through this interpretation of Kierkegaard’s notion of faith, one can begin to see the emergence of a different kind of understanding that exceeds normative epistemologies and ontologies.

Kierkegaard’s Authorship and His Biases

With the variety of contemporary gender theorists and philosophers, why have I chosen to use Kierkegaard’s texts and his knight of faith as a means of rethinking how we approach identity categories in relation to gender and sexuality? Why work with an authorship that is permeated with misogyny, racism, classism, and religious bias? I do not seek to resolve any of these deep prejudices in his authorship. In The Concept of Anxiety, we clearly find Kierkegaard’s
own prejudices when he claims that woman “seduced the man” and that she is “the weaker sex” (Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* 317). When confronted with these charges against Kierkegaard, I find myself uninterested and unable to defend his statements. There is no way of ignoring or pushing aside the fact that Kierkegaard is a prejudiced and biased individual. In line with Rosfort, I do not think that we can simply justify Kierkegaard’s prejudicial views on the basis of his “pseudonyms, irony, the historical period, the dramatic context” (Rosfort, “Challenging Identity” 4). Instead, grappling with Kierkegaard’s prejudices and biases can help each of us recognize how we fail to live up to the ideals we espouse within our own exclusive normative frames.

Rosfort’s analysis of Kierkegaard’s prejudices and biases offers us a new way of approaching and redeploying this authorship. Despite Kierkegaard’s insistence on essential gender differences and adoption of other biases of this time, throughout his authorship “these biases are countered by an insistence on a radical, non-gendered Christian neighbourly love for all persons irrespective of their individual differences” (Rosfort, “Challenging Identity” 22). His prejudices should not be glossed over by this radical insistence of Christian love. However, I do think it is possible to see how these sedimented prejudices are often ambiguously overcome through Kierkegaard’s insistence of universal love. Within his authorship, we find an “ambiguity—and at times explicit conflict—between biased and oppressive conceptions of human existence and a radical ethical demand of human equality” at the center of Kierkegaard’s understanding of human selfhood (Rosfort, “Sacrificing Gender” 388). This conflict at work within his authorship can point us to how the recognition of the human being can be put under contestation and is never fully determined by normative forces.
Although this may not provide a full explanation for Kierkegaard’s overcoming of prejudices and biases, there seems to be a ‘leaking out’ phenomenon at work within his work. Despite one’s best attempts to remain in control of a distinction between oneself and the other, there are times when these selves ‘leak out’ into each other. I think that it is this notion of ‘spillage’ that allows for us to see how new conceptions of the human being arise. In line with how the knight of faith does not solely remain within the ethical, this ‘spillage’ with the other is not merely assimilation to normative frames. Borrowing from Sara Ahmed’s terminology, this spillage can be messy and impossible to contain (Ahmed, *Being in Trouble* 182). In an attempt to clean up this trouble, anyone can find themselves on unstable grounds to make a coherent and stable account of themselves. This inability to never fully articulate who or what I am when I present myself reveals a site of Kierkegaardian anxiety that fails to come to definitive conclusions about itself. This finds resonance with how we struggle to fully understand and make intelligible Abraham’s actions in *Fear and Trembling* and the drag performer’s performances in *Paris is Burning*. These failures to become comprehensible and legible within the ethical frame show the limits of our ability to come to definitive conclusions about ourselves, even as we rally under conventional significations. It is because of this inability to come to definitive conclusions that queerness does not remain as a stable identity category, but becomes a mobile site of anxiety that challenges these regulatory regimes.

**Gender Performance and Gender Performativity**

Throughout their engagement in the field of gender studies, Judith Butler’s theory of performativity has become their most widely known contribution. I propose that Kierkegaard’s knight of faith can be put into dialogue with Butler’s allegorical usage of drag to explore how
conceptions of gender/sex are contested through a parodic replay of established gender norms. By utilizing Butler’s understanding of performativity, I hope to draw out how entanglements and conventions are not merely repressive forces in the struggle for ethical recognition. Instead, I aim to point to how these entanglements sustain a renegotiation of definitive gender categories.

In addition to becoming their most well known contribution, it has also become their most widely misunderstood. First, I will begin with Butler’s understanding of performativity as found in *Bodies that Matter*. In this text, Butler takes the time to clarify their understanding and usage of the term performativity. Thinking with Eve Sedgwick and J.L. Austin’s reflections on performative acts, Butler clarifies that these acts “are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform, a certain action and exercise a binding power” (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 171). This definition contrasts with the way this theory is often interpreted. Butler’s notion of performativity is often misconstrued as gender performance. In this context, performativity is often taken to mean that one can freely enact an alternative gender at any given point. By viewing performativity as a free performance, it is then assumed that we can free ourselves from normative and sedimented conceptions of gender/sex through unmoored performances or stylizations that seem to radically depart from the standard.

Butler’s clarified notion of performativity does not articulate a radically unmoored agency to deconstruct gender or sexual categories. Although there must certainly be space to challenge sedimented forms of gender, this is not what Butler is discussing with their theory of gender performativity. Performativity does not describe a notion of radical resignification that renders anew power and discourse at every moment. Instead, this concept speaks to how we are
to “understand [knowledge and power’s] convergent force as an accumulated effect of usage that both constrains and enables their reworking” (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 170). These statements “not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 171). These reiterated instances of naming, not exclusively defined as verbal speech, work to form a discursively recognizable subject. One could see how this convergence of knowledge and power is brought into effect through the potentially injurious and/or prideful usage of the word ‘queer’. This term has been used to create a perverted subject—one that departs from the standard heterosexual. The person who is labelled queer becomes recognizable through their departure from the norm. Despite the repudiation faced by this term, it has also taken up alternative and prideful meanings through its reclamation. ///

The repetition of discursive construction is not found through a singular and unifying source. The person who enacts this discursive recognition does not necessarily find the power invested within their singular subjecthood, “but in the citational legacy by which a contemporary ‘act’ emerges in the context of a chain of binding conventions” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 172). An example can be found within the marital proclamation. The judge derives the binding power for this marriage act, not through his own individual being, but through the citation of an accumulated history of marriages that are brought into being through that speech act. Here, the performative speech act, through its citation of past bindings, produces a coherent and knowable, married unit. This citational power creates a genealogy of power that makes it difficult to locate exactly from what and where the power originates.

Through this discussion on the forcible nature of performative acts, there seems to be another side to performativity that shows how power is multidirectional. Although it may seem
like this diffused notion of power makes it increasingly difficult to resist the forces one opposes, it may also offer a pathway that puts into crisis the prevailing norm at its repeated iteration. Subjecthood in Butler’s terms is not merely a unidirectional and fully-determining shaping by a dominant force. There is also negotiation with those given terms. Although the production of gender remains forcible, it must not be seen as fully determining. Instead of a unidirectional model of power, performativity shows how “the terms to which we do, nevertheless, lay claim, the terms through which we insist on politicizing identity and desire, often demand a turn against this constitutive historicity” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 172). This can again find reference to the political sign of ‘queer’. Although this term has been and could possibly still be used in a derogatory manner, the usage of this term has been appropriated by the same people previously subjected to and crafted by this term. The resignification of this term reveals the workings of an agency that is “though implicated in the very relations of power it seeks to rival, is not, as a consequence reducible to those dominant forms” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 184). My initial argument asks us to consider how repeated plays of categories risk the stability of those categories. From this explanation of performativity, I hope to have brought out how pockets of agency are found within systems of regulation.

**Agency and Bonds**

In our everyday engagements, the bonds and bounds that form our lives become apparent. However, these bonds and bounds are often lost sight of in our theorizations of gender. Alongside Foucault, Butler presents a particular notion of agency that takes freedom as that which “is at stake when one seeks the epistemological and ontological limits of the self as well as the ever-present possibilities of transgression for other selves” (Phạm 31). With this in mind, is it possible
to think with and through different modes of agency that are other than freedom-driven and are not always at the limit of the known? In “Enduring Bonds: Politics and Life Outside Freedom as Autonomy”, Quỳnh N. Phảm examines the implications of agency underlying Butler’s particular discourse of freedom as Phảm presents alternative modalities of agency that are rooted in contexts of bonds and boundedness.

While performativity may describe being implicated within power structures that one does not choose, Butler’s attitude of critique remains problematic for assuming that it is always possible to operate at the complete limit of what is knowable and possible. In this text, Phảm focuses on Butler’s attitude of critique that “constantly strives to operate at the limit” (Phảm 37). In Butler’s “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue”, critique is “an ethical mode of self-making in which the limits of epistemology and ontology are interrogated without recourse to answers or definition” (Butler, “What is Critique?” 303). This stance of critique brings attention to a mode of perpetual self-making without the need to settle on a finite or conventional identity. Foucault and Butler’s notion of critique points to how terms and categories could be radically resignified. Although this stance of critique at the epistemological and ontological limits remains important in destabilizing constrained understandings of knowability and livability, we must also consider the networks of agency that are found in one’s embeddedness in these thick webs of sociality. In this section, I hope to bring out Phảm’s response to this mode of critique that strives to operate at the limit and pushes for increasingly new possibilities beyond the normative epistemological and ontological frame. Through this, I aim to situate my enquiry into Butler’s allegorical usage of drag and Kierkegaard’s knight of faith with and through the contexts of the ethical.
This article departs from the standard notions of transgression in order to enquire into how people have made the everyday inhabitable through dwelling within their given bonds of belonging. Phạm asks the reader how “can we imagine ways of acting that do not aim to uproot settled norms and at the same time do not merely reinscribe them either?” (Phạm 34). To help answer this question, Phạm proposes an alternative reading of the texts of Saba Mahmood and Hồ Xuân Hương (HXH) that remains skeptical of attempts to incorporate these rebellious speech acts into “a transformative logic oriented toward a new order of epistemology and ontology” (Phạm 38). A Butlerian analysis that sees these two texts as critiques at the limits of epistemology and ontology loses sight of how these renegotiations are made within bounds of tradition and belonging.

Following from this, rebellious speech acts do not necessarily delve into the realm of the Butlerian ‘impossible’. For Butler, the impossible scene is “that of a body that has not yet been given social definition, a body that is, strictly speaking, not accessible to us, that nevertheless becomes accessible on the occasion of an address…that does not ‘discover’ this body, but constitutes it fundamentally” (Butler Excitable Speech, 5). Instead of this impossible scene, Phạm’s finds a politics of impiety at work in HXH’s poem “The Snail”: “The Snail / Fate and my parents shaped me like a snail / Night and day, among filthy grass I trail / Virtuous sir, if you love me, take off my yếm / Please don’t poke around my hole” (Phạm 40). HXH’s poetry is often associated with pleasure and sexual freedom that is often attributed to a supposed “desire to break with suffocating conventions, assuming a sharp distinction between an individual interiority and social external forces” (Phạm 39). However, Phạm shows how HXH’s poetry “does not straightforwardly shift from the domain of the unspeakable to the domain of the
speakable as in Butler’s formulation of performative subversions” (Phạm 40). Instead, through improper and proper poetic conduct, she violates and does not violate the given norms of sexuality. Phạm’s analysis of the politics of impiety at work within this poem shows how that which is unspeakable is smuggled into the speakable “in a way that might threaten established conventions” and “be dismissed as too obscene or too vulgar by her or our contemporaries” (Phạm 41). Despite a Butlerian interpretation that might label this as impossible speech for the poet’s space and time, this impious poetry is not received as nonsensical. Instead, it is fully comprehensible to the readers and listeners of the poem. While performative subversions tend to posit a straightforward shift, and thus a clean distinction between the two, Phạm offers a view that takes into account how the unspeakable bleeds into the speakable.

Although the unspeakable may be put into the terms of the speakable, it does not lose its efficacy to disturb and provoke. Instead, the poetry of HXH gains its force through its attachment and reference to the ordinary and the established. Here, HXH does not strive to completely transgress the given limit. Instead, she operates fully within and through the literary traditions and practices of her society. This seems to resonate with Sara Ahmed’s discussion of queer normativity that supposes that “Queer lives do not suspend the attachments that are crucial to the reproduction of heteronormativity, and this does not diminish ‘queerness’, but intensifies the work that it can do” (Ahmed, Cultural Politics of Emotion 152). Both, Phạm and Ahmed, show how a straightforward path of transgression is not always desirable, wanted or possible. This impurity and mixing of forms shows how resistance to norms is not pursued along a clearly delineated line. By drawing attention to this smuggling of the unspeakable into the speakable, we can begin to focus on how the ordinary becomes excitable and disturbing to standard ways of
knowing and being. These considerations of agency through contexts of bonds and boundedness
brought by Phảm provide an important consideration in rethinking how identity categories may
be repeated and disturbed in my conversation between Kierkegaard’s knight of faith and Butler’s
allegorical usage of drag.

What is Drag?

Drag performance is often understood and carried out in many different ways. For the
sake of this project, I will primarily be discussing drag performance as found in *Paris is Burning*
(1991). Drag is not limited to bending gender categories, but also extends to re-articulated
notions of class and race. For example, ballroom categories include “Executive Realness” or
“High Fashion Parisian” through which aspirations of a desirable and livable life are tied to
notions of wealth and whiteness. Furthermore, dominant discourses on drag primarily focus on
the drag queen and *drag queening*: “an over-the-top, glamorous doing of hyperfemininity by a
man who will eventually reveal his underlying ‘boy body’” (Heller 2). Through this dominant
definition of drag queening, the biological sex of the performer is cited as the objective reality of
the performer’s identity. This dominant drag discourse produces the underlying sex/gender of the
performer as a stable and knowable reality. This remains problematic for drag discourse because
by viewing drag in a manner that implies a stable and knowable sexual identity that overrides
any appearance or performance, the performance is seen as a phenomenon that is easily
separable from the body that is undergoing materialization.

As shown in *Paris is Burning* (1991), drag comes in many different forms with
performers of various gender identities and gender performances. In response to the diverse
forms of drag, in *Queering Drag: Redefining the Discourse of Gender-Bending*, Meredith Heller
defines drag as theatrical gender-bending. Hellers’ central enquiry dives into how current drag discourses tend to establish sex as a permanent reality with gender as a mutable one. For example, a drag discourse that requires a stable sexual identity poses the drag performer’s gender identity as discursively materialized “not by reference to the part of the stage presentation that bends or queers identity but rather by direct reference to the performer’s assumed stable cisgender identity in contrast to the gender seen onstage” (Heller 4). Heller’s opposition to the dominant definition of drag reflects a wider debate within gender discourses on the objective nature of sexual identity. Heller’s critique of this distinction between sex and gender in drag discourses problematizes the notion that gender is cultural, and therefore mutable, while sex is biological, and therefore immutable. This neat distinction remains problematic because it imposes one stable and knowable reality for the diverse articulations of gender categories that exist throughout different spaces and times.

*The Materialization of the Body*

This distinction between gender/sex runs into additional debate in *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler. Butler shows how within biologically essentialist gender discourses, “‘the body’ appears as a passive medium on which cultural meaning are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 12). Within this discourse, sexual identity is conferred through a reference to the presence or absence of the phallus. From this objective and stable biological indicator, it is supposed, comes the cultural meanings of gender that are seen as fluid and mutable.
Sara Ahmed describes how viewing gender as mutable can be used to reinforce biological sex as ontological and objective. Ahmed, reflecting on Butler’s research, claims that “gender can be admitted as something constructed, contingent, made, a faction, as a way of not troubling ‘sex,’ as a foundational category” (Ahmed, Being in Trouble 182). Butler’s argument proposes that even the material body is under a particular discursive and political contestation. What constitutes the body is always placed within a particular discursive and political frame. Butler further clarifies in Bodies that Matter that sex is a regulatory ideal that is materialized through a “process whereby regulatory norms materialized ‘sex’ and achieve this materialization through forcible reiteration of those norms” (Butler, Bodies that Matter 2). This can be seen through the sexual assignment given by the doctor who determines the sex and gender of the newborn child through the presence or absence of the phallus. Instead of viewing sexual assignment as a direct and unmediated perception of the body, Butler argues that the anatomical body itself is a construction that cannot have a “signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender” (Gender Trouble 12). This can be further seen through normalizing surgeries performed on intersex persons that attempt to create a coherent and recognizable body within established medical terms. With Butler’s analysis of the body’s materialization that occurs through a particular discourse, the stability of sexual identity is troubled through the drag performer’s performances that put into parody the dominant conceptions of the gender they put into play.

Narrating the Ethical

In Fear and Trembling, Johannes de silentio takes the reader through the story of Abraham’s binding of Issac or the Akedah. In “Attunement” or “Stemning”, de silentio begins with a claim and a question about Abraham’s greatness and knowability: “Yet no one was as
great as Abraham: who is able to understand him?” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 48). This seems to thematize how Abraham stands as a figure at the edge of or potentially beyond the intelligibility of the ethical. Throughout the text, de silentio ethically narrates the *Akedah* in four variations. Abraham’s faith in God, while narratable within the ethical account also seems to exceed the ethical retelling. It is through these four variations that de silentio exposes the limits of intelligibility provided through the ethical account.

In the following section, I focus on Kierkegaard’s sphere of the ethical in *Fear and Trembling*. This notion of the ethical in Kierkegaard’s work is seen primarily within the Hegelian term of *Sittlichkeit* or in Kierkegaard’s Danish, *det Sædelige*. Through the variations of the *Akedah*, I aim to show how these ethical repetitions are not reducible to straightforward extensions of the ethical viewpoint, nor are they straightforward subversions. Instead, these repetitions offer a challenge to the imposed limitations of the ethical realm through a critical taking up of the ethical viewpoint. More broadly, I aim to connect this challenge to how drag disturbs the neat reproduction of stable gender/sexual categories through an appropriation of dominant gender norms.

Kierkegaard’s second sphere of existence or the ethical outlines a life that is guided by adherence to what is publicly deemed moral. The person acting within the ethical is rooted in social requirements and expectations (Lippit and Evans). For Hegel, the idea behind the ethics of *Sittlichkeit* “is that public morality, or the principles of social and political cohesion underlying any actual society, are expressions of universal human goals” (Hannay 29). In order to be seen as a moral being within Hegel’s ethical viewpoint, the individual must conform to and act in accordance with the “principles of public morality” (Hannay 29). This universalizing system
creates the circumstances for condemning Abraham’s actions. Through an ethical evaluation of Abraham’s actions, his willingness to sacrifice Issac is turned into a “willing[ness] to murder Issac” (Kierkegaard 60). This ethical expression of Abraham’s actions reveals a set of principles through which one could evaluate the moral quality of Abraham’s sacrifice of Issac. By evaluating Abraham’s actions within the ethical system, Abraham remains morally condemnable because of the three consequences of defining the ethical as “the universal”. These three consequences are: “(i) that the individual’s moral performance must be judged by its underlying social intention; (ii) that there are no duties to God other than duties that are in the first instance to the universal; and (iii) that it is a moral requirement that one not conceal one’s moral projects or the reasons one has for failing to carry them through” (Hannay 28). Each of de silentio’s variations of the Akedah reveal how Abraham has infringed on the ethical posed as the universal. Through this first chapter of the text, the reader is invited to become attuned to the ethical sphere through de silentio’s ethical evaluation of Abraham’s actions.

Narration and Parodic Attunement

These ethical renarrations of the story may be solidifying the stance of the ethical—attempting to contain a spillage into the religious. Perhaps, each narration further reinforces these ethical principles that condemn Abraham through the repetitive force of these four variations. The repetition of any account or proclamation could potentially solidify a constrained point of view. Sara Ahmed describes how “Regulative norms function in a way as ‘repetitive strain injuries’ (RSIs). Through repeating some gestures and not others, or through being orientated in some directions and not others, bodies become contorted; they get twisted into shapes that enable some action only insofar as they restrict capacity for other kinds of action” (Ahmed, Cultural
The repetitive strain injuries described by Ahmed outlines how regulative norms become a way of shaping how one acts in their world. When these norms are repetitively instituted onto the body, they could potentially restrain how one knows and exists. In relation to Kierkegaard, these four variations that remain within the ethical account could potentially naturalize the ethical realm to the point that it becomes all encompassing with little room for substantial critique.

However, these variations that reproduce an ethical retelling of the *Akedah,* may potentially present a challenge to the stability of the ethical account even as the narrator repeats it through his four variations. Though Kierkegaard sees the value of the ethical stage, in his ethical variations, he continues to signal the reader to go beyond what is already known and knowable.

The following section focuses on Johannes de silentio’s variations of the *Akedah* found in “Attunement.” In this analysis, I attempt to elucidate how these repetitive variations of the binding of Issac disturb the fixity of the ethical viewpoint. I begin by describing the first two variations of the *Akedah.* Instead of focusing on the three Problems or the “dialectical” sections of this text, I am specifically choosing to focus on “Attunement” because of the ethical repetitions found within this chapter. By beginning with these variations of the Abraham and Issac story, I aim to establish these ethical movements as essential to Butler’s description of drag performance as repetitive acts that put into crisis and expose the instability of dominant gender categories.

The ethical perspective in *Fear and Trembling* is guided by Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Johannes de silentio. Kierkegaard takes the reader through the story of Abraham’s binding of Issac found in Genesis 22. In the biblical telling of this story, Abraham is commanded by God to
sacrifice the best he has, Issac, on Mount Moriah. Abraham, up to drawing his knife, shows his willingness to sacrifice his son. This act is only stopped when an angel comes at the last second to prevent Abraham’s sacrifice of Issac by supplying a sacrificial lamb to take his place. This very act reveals the tension between the ethical and the religious. While the ethical deems Abraham a murderer, “the religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Issac” and still able to rejoice when able to keep Issac (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 60). This biblical version of Abraham’s attempted sacrifice reveals the religious perspective. This biblical and religious telling contrasts with the four variations found in “Attunement” that condemn Abraham.

**The Attuning Variations**

In Ch. 1 “Attunement”, Kierkegaard iterates the story of Abraham and Issac through four variations. The narrator begins this chapter by describing his admiration for Abraham, yet “less and less could he understand” Abraham’s actions (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 44). In order to contend with this incomprehensibility, he narrates the *Akedah* through the ethical viewpoint. The first retelling of Abraham’s sacrifice reveals Abraham as a madman. As Abraham is about to sacrifice Issac on Mount Moriah, Issac sees his father with a wild gaze who says “Foolish boy, do you believe I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you believe this is God’s commandment? No, it is my own desire” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 45). Here, Abraham poses himself as the sole-legislator of his action by separating his ethically sinful action as separate from God’s command. He puts the entire blame of the sacrifice on himself, rather than risking Issac lose faith in God by attributing his murder to God’s command. Furthermore, below his breath, Abraham says to himself: “Lord in heaven I thank Thee; it is after all better that he believe I am a monster
than that he lose faith in Thee” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 45-46). This particular narration of the sacrificial story opens up Kierkegaard’s central enquiry into the realm of faith. By ending the first re-telling of the story with Abraham’s concern for Issac’s faith instead of his own ethical standing, he already begins to show his concern for the religious over the ethical. Although the narrator remains within the ethical point-of-view, there seems to be an anticipation of going beyond the ethical and toward that which is not clearly knowable within the ethical grammar.

From this first ethical variation of the sacrificial story come three other narrations that attempt to capture the situation within the ethical. Each variation shows how an ethical narration of the *Akedah* fails to see how Abraham’s faith plays a central role in his renunciation of Issac and fully receiving him back. The second variation of the story ends with a ram being sacrificed instead of Issac. However, instead of a joyous Abraham, “he could not forget that God had demanded this of him. Issac throve as before; but Abraham’s eye was darkened, he saw joy no more” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 46). Within the ethical viewpoint, this would be a reasonable endpoint for an Abraham who was driven to murder his son: “if Hegel’s philosophy were right, then Abraham would indeed be a murderer” (Butler, *Senses of the Subject* 135). Even though Abraham did not commit the sacrifice, according to the ethical expectation, Abraham would still face his own personal guilt from his willingness to kill his own son. However, the original telling of the story evades this guilt. Instead, the “real” Abraham “gained everything and kept Issac” and “sat happily at table with him” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 56). How is it that Abraham can renounce Issac and fully receive him back? This situation portrayed in the biblical telling that allows Abraham to completely rejoice directly after being willing and
expected to sacrifice his son, evades the guilt that is imposed onto the person who infringes on the universal commands of the ethical.

With this, we can potentially see how the ethical is brought to its own limit with these narrations. Johannes de silentio, reproducing and implicated within the ethical viewpoint, shows how “Each effort to narrate what happened with Abraham is also an effort to fathom how it is that Abraham could prepare himself to act in such a way” (Butler, *Senses of the Subject* 130). These repetitions of the story attempt to capture Abraham’s situation. But, they ultimately fail to understand how it is that Abraham’s actions are able to be thought through and evaluated outside of the principles of the ethical. Instead of reproducing the ethical as increasingly inarguable, these variations point to the instability of the ethical account. The repetitions found within this chapter fail to merely reinscribe the ethical viewpoint. Instead, they destabilize the ethical realm by pointing toward the limits of any account to capture Abraham’s situation. Through their failure to exhaustively describe Abraham’s situation within the ethical viewpoint, it becomes possible to see beyond these repetitions as simple and straightforward extensions of the ethical.

Lastly, I want to bring attention to the stories of the mother and the weaning child through which one could see how the suspension of the ethical works. At the end of each variation, we find a story about a child being weaned from the mother. At the end of the second variation, “When the child has grown and is to be weaned the mother virginally covers the breast, so the child no more has a mother. Lucky the child that lost its mother in no other way” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 46). This seems to give further clarity to the type of attunement Kierkegaard is proposing. Here, the relationship between the mother and child is being disrupted by the child becoming older. Although it is possible to read these four stories of
the weaning child as an end to the ethical, we can possibly read them as transformations in the mother-child relationship. While the relationship has changed, it never fully disappears. Could it be that the pulls of the ethical remain in tension and actually sustain this encounter with the realm of faith?

The term “Attunement” read within this context does not seem to simply bring one into harmony with the ethical standard, but pushes the reader to attempt to see beyond that which is already known. If attunement is a tuning up into harmony with Hegel’s ethical system, Kierkegaard’s usage of it does not call the reader to reproduce and remain within the ethical. Instead, the repetitions of the Akedah and the breast feeding allegories show how clear categorizations, principles, and evaluations run into their own limit. Through the parodic attunement of the Akedah, repetition is not limited to being a reproduction or solidification of the ethical realm, but holds the possibility to challenge the stability of this category.

The Knight of Faith and Drag Performance

These replays of the Akedah that depart from the original narrative of the biblical story can be extended to how categories of gender/sex undergo a crisis through drag performance. In “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”, Butler discusses how “troublesome” identifications can disturb the fixity of identities that present themselves as singular and stable (Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 120). Drag performance, in its reiteration of gender/sexual norms, shows us how the norm is instituted and comes to constitute the body in its presentation to the audience with a stable and singular identity. Through their reference of the drag performance, Butler claims that a given identity category may reveal itself as a singular and stable unity, but are no more than parodic effects. In this section, I attempt to make clear how these disruptions to
the stability of the ethical found in “Attunement” relate to the crisis that is produced through drag performance.

In “Preamble of the Heart” the reader gets a glimpse of the knight of faith. Here, the knight of faith is not depicted as an extraordinary hero, but as an ordinary man. This figure, exemplified by Abraham, does not thoroughly or cleanly depart from the ethical. Instead, the knight of faith continues to engage with the ethical realm even as it is suspended in the Problemata. This can be seen when Kierkegaard’s knight of faith is “able to land in just that way, and in the same second to look as though one was up and walking, to transform the leap in life to a gait, to express the sublime in the pedestrian absolutely” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 70). This shows how the religious is snuck into the ethical. These religious movements of infinitude and finitude described by Kierkegaard show how the religious realm does not consist of a clean departure or break from the ethical realm. Instead, this realm of faith requires a thorough play with the conventions of the ethical world. Even as the knight of faith performs the movements of infinitude, “it makes those of finitude” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 67).

When the knight of faith seems to have departed from the ethical, she continues to engage with it and make reference to it. This seems to be where the potential to disturb established gender/sexual norms lies.

Categories remain central to Kierkegaard’s portrayal of Abraham’s story. In “Attunement”, Kierkegaard continues to reproduce the category of the ethical through these four variations. However, as shown in the previous section, these retellings should not be solely read as straightforward reproductions of the ethical. Instead, they seem to disrupt the category of the ethical by pointing to that which is beyond—the realm of faith or the religious. Kierkegaard
positions Abraham as the exemplary knight of faith. Despite a common expectation that depicts the knight of faith as a hero who permanently leaves the ethical world, the knight of faith does not find rest by leaving the mundane, ethical, or conventional.

Instead, the knight of faith’s force to critique the limitations of the ethical realm lies within a critical engagement with the given principles of the ethical. In other words, the knight of faith “resigned everything infinitely, and then took everything back on the strength of the absurd. He is continually making the movement of infinity, but he makes it with such accuracy and poise that he is continually getting finitude out of it, and not for a second would one suspect anything else” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 70). This shows how the suspension of the ethical performed by the knight of faith does not offer us with a clean disjunction from the ethical world, but a thorough play with this realm. This play requires a repetitive engagement and reference to the established ethical world. In this way, the knight of faith also becomes an example of performativity within the ethical system. In her reworking of the ethical, she finds agency: “though implicated in the very relations of power it seeks to rival, is not, as a consequence reducible to those dominant forms” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 184). Although the knight of faith constantly challenges the ethical, her agency is not found isolated from its universalizing power. She “cannot disavow power as the condition of its own possibility” (Butler, *GT* xxv). Instead, she reworks and reverses the terms that have been used and may continue to be used against her. It is through this active play with her given conventions that the knight of faith and the drag performer disrupt a clean reproduction of the ethical category.

This entanglement in relations of the established world can also be found through the renegotiations of gender/sexual categories enacted by the drag performer. The performer does not
simply do away with the dominant representations of the gender binary system. For example, drag performers who participate in female categories perform within descriptions of “high femininity”. Through a structuralist account, this performance may be seen as a reproduction of cis-heteronormativity as this performance may simply solidify the binary gender system.

Fredric Jameson’s analysis of aesthetic production shows how “aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods…at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation” (Jameson 56).

Although Jameson is specifically discussing how subversive aesthetic productions can ultimately serve to reinforce commodity production, this dynamic that describes subversion that is then assimilated could be transposed onto the repetition of dominant gender categories within queer spaces. When first viewing the documentary film, *Paris is Burning* (1991), I rushed to view these people and their performances in the ballroom as simple extensions of cisgender and heterosexual representations of femininity or masculinity. Seen through this structuralist account, the drag performance offered in this documentary film, although seemingly subversive, were read as extensions of cis-heteronormativity within the queer space of the New York Ballroom scene. These performances during my first viewing simply served as examples for how we are not inclined to think and act outside of these restrictive categories. Instead of thinking outside of these heterosexual and cisgender norms, I saw these people as solely re-idealizing these norms without challenging their stability. While this performance may disturb those who would rather
have their naturalized views on gender/sex unquestioned, I previously thought that these performances ultimately uphold a restrictive representation of masculinity and femininity.

I would like to offer an alternative account to this structuralist interpretation through Butler’s copy/origin positions. Instead of simply reproducing normative gender structures and representations, the performer may actually be disturbing the stability of the given category even as they are continuously reproducing it through their stylized modes of dress, dance, and composure. Through the particular instances of drag performance found in *Paris is Burning*, one could potentially see how the origin (the cisgender woman) is put into parody through a miming. However, this repetitive miming does not merely reinscribe the cisgender woman as the origin and the on-stage performance of the drag performer as a copy. Instead, this play with given dominant gendered characteristics provides the basis for rethinking the origin-copy positions. This copy-origin dynamic can be viewed when Butler describes how queens, butches, and femmes are seen as imitations or derivatives of the heterosexual real (cisgender man or cisgender woman). For example, a lesbian woman is seen as a mere derivative of the real heterosexual woman within the dominant context. She, the lesbian woman, is believed to have failed to live up to the ideal expectations of womanhood (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 182). In relation to drag, categories and identities that are at play are dominantly seen as mere copies of the heterosexual and cisgender origin. However, this position as origin remains suspect “for how can something operate as an origin if there are no secondary consequences which retrospectively confirm the originality of that origin?” (Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 128). Here, one can see how the parody of drag performance works. It may render itself as a copy of a “real” heterosexual identity, but it is in this exposition that the originality of the origin is put into crisis.
This parodic attunement may align the performer’s body to the dominant representations of “high femininity”. But, it is through this parodic attunement that “the entire framework of copy and origin proves radically unstable as each position inverts into the other and confounds the possibility of any stable way to locate the temporal or logical priority of either term” (Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 128). The efficacy to disturb, in both the knight of faith and the drag performer, lies in their ability to disrupt their given category through a critical repetition of what is already established and known.

The efficacy to disrupt the copy-origin relationship is not through a direct appeal to outside of the binary. Instead, it is through a clear reference to set gendered representations and characteristics. Here, one can see how the shift from the ethical to the religious is not a straightforward or direct subversion. Taking from Phảm’s critique of Butler and Foucault, Kierkegaard shows how transitions between the ethical and the religious are not simply limited to a direct and straightforward shift between the established and the unintelligible. Instead, the movements of infinitude (challenging the rigidity of the gender category) are “snuck” into the movements of finitude (reiterating the given gender category). Although the knight of faith enters into the accepted intelligibility of the ethical realm, she also shows how there is an intelligibility or understanding to be had that exceeds it. This attitude of critique is not sustained outside of the contested category, but within and through it.

With Kierkegaard’s repetition of the ethical variations, we can potentially see how repetition does not simply reinscribe the prevailing ethical realm. In relation to gender/sexual categories, Butler argues that “That there is a need for a repetition at all is a sign that identity is not self-identical. It requires to be instituted again and again, which is to say that it runs the risk
of becoming de-instituted at every interval” (Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 131). This runs contrary to a strictly structuralist account of power that may claim that “anything we seek to change within the contemporary order will simply augment the power of the order and that we’re coopted and contained in advance” (Butler, “Changing the Subject” 334). For example, a structuralist critique of drag performance in *Paris is Burning* may view the performances of Angie Xtravaganza as producing a bourgeois, cisgender and white notion of femininity through her stylized performance. However, following Butler’s description of performativity as describing “being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power” this structuralist critique of drag performance as straightforwardly solidifying dominant gender norms is put into crisis (Butler, *BTM* 184). Instead of viewing drag performance as a direct reproduction of prevailing gender norms that are accompanied with class and racial differences, performativity helps clarify how one is embedded within structures of power even as one opposes these structures.

Even further, these constraints posed by these categories of the ethical become the very workings of the agency to challenge it. This can find further clarification through Butler’s allegorical usage of drag in *Gender Trouble*. Butler contends that “the performance of gender that the drag queen offers is no less real and no less true than the performance of gender that any ordinary man or woman might perform, that it gives us a kind of allegory of the mundane performance of gender” (Butler, “Changing the Subject” 344). This explanation of drag textualizes how gendered norms come to constitute the body through a regime of stylizations. This gender-bending performance offered by the drag queen may be read as an aberration from the stable and assumed sexual identity of that person. However, it may also offer us a moment
when that institution of the norm is rendered explicit for the viewers of the performance act regardless of the person’s sexual assignment. This repetition of the norm finds resonance in Kierkegaard’s four variations offered in “Attunement” when de silentio challenges the stability of the ethical category through his parodying of the Akedah within the ethical viewpoint. The repetition of stylized norms onto the body of the drag performer, does not simply reinstate these signs of femininity or masculinity as stable. Instead, it puts into parody these seemingly stable identities through a continued repetition of the stylized regime onto the supposedly “wrong” body. This form of identification that happens simultaneously with dis-identification reveals how a replication of the norm can actually challenge its very stability.

Now, I want to return to the title of the chapter in Fear and Trembling, “Attunement”. Kierkegaard seems to be getting the reader into the state of readiness for the consideration of the Biblical story of Abraham and Issac that will be discussed in his three Problems. Zadie Smith claims that this chapter acts as “a rehearsal: it lays out a series of rational explanations the better to demonstrate their poverty as explanations” (Smith). Smith’s interpretation of Kierkegaard’s “Attunement” shows how these repetitions lay the groundwork for a more overt mode of critique to occur through the three Problems. This demonstrates how the repetition of gender norms in drag performance reveal the poverty of fixing these gender characteristics to certain bodies and as impossible characteristics for others. Kierkegaard’s knight of faith does not require a complete departure from ethical entanglements or the material world. Instead, the knight of faith and drag performer’s suspension of the ethical is through a play with given conventions that allows us to see how resistance to norms are snuck into everyday life.
Although the drag performer performs within dominant gender presentations, one cannot simply reduce these performances to a reproduction of dominant power structures. This performance maintains its efficacy to critique gender/sexual categories through its reference to the perceived stability of these norms. The drag performance, in rendering visible how the norm constitutes the body and challenging the stability of the norm through a repetition of that constitution, invokes a parodic attunement. Just as de silentio aligns Abraham to ethical principles, drag performance aligns the body of the drag performer with a hegemonic conception of the particular gender being performed. But in doing so, it destabilizes the singularity and neat reproduction of that heterosexual original. Attunement is usually defined as a bringing into harmony. However, as shown through the knight of faith and the drag performer, this is not a blind abidance to the “universal” norm. Instead, these acts of resistance to regularized and normative ways of being, whether in the knight of faith or the drag queen, are “snuck in” through a critical repetition that exposes the limits of the ethical.

**Conclusion: Toward a Queer and Feminist Politics**

My thesis contends that reading Kierkegaard’s knight of faith with Butler’s allegorical usage of drag points us toward an engagement with the limits of given categories that allows us to see how imitation and repetition do not merely extend prevailing norms and power structures, but subvert their stability through a parodic play. In this conclusion, I hope to make clear the stakes of this enquiry into the knight of faith and the drag performer.

When I first began this project, I wanted to see how queers have made their claims to life through forms of overt protest on the streets—notably during the DIE-INS that took place during the AIDS crisis. While these protests remain essential and necessary for a livable life, feminist
philosophy has encouraged me to think with forms of resistance that do not always render
themselves so clearly. Especially, when these forms of resistance often appear to be upholding
restrictive norms and values.

In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed crafts the term “feminist ear” (Ahmed, *Living a
Feminist Life* 203). This ear becomes attuned to listening to forms of resistance that are not so
easily legible. This attention to what is not heard within one’s discursive frame remains
important to critical feminist work. It is in becoming attuned to those everyday negotiations that
the mundane can become extraordinary. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa say “The vision of
our spirituality provides us with no trap door solution, no escape hatch tempting us to ‘transcend’
our struggle. We must act in the everyday world” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 195). Here, these two
feminists bring attention to how we are brought to struggle with the conventions and norms that
we are thrown into.

If we are to struggle for a world that is safe for and open to difference, it will not be done
through a universalizing standard. Instead, it must be through sustaining relationships that are
mobile and in-flux. This appreciation for difference can be seen when Anzaldúa says that “The
danger is in being too universal and humanitarian and invoking the eternal to the sacrifice of the
particular and the feminine and the specific historical moment” (Anzaldúa 170). Here, the
universal and humanitarian are shown to be coded with masculinity. Instead of simply
assimilating this into Kierkegaard’s push for the particular over the universal, I would like to see
how this quote can point to a field that is not entirely yet clear. Kierkegaard and Anzaldúa seem
to be speaking to how the universal or the ethical, across their two contrasting spaces and times,
produces a discursive field that regulates knowledge and being. This discursive field of the
ethical or universal produces an ideal subject that excludes the flourishing of ways of being and knowing that depart from the ideal. When I first began this research project, I sought to transpose the knight of faith onto the drag queen, as if the knight of faith was the origin and the drag queen the copy. As I conclude this paper, I hope to have shown how critique of restrictive structures is not found in one source, but in multiple. Queer knowledge has always been embodied and embedded. It cannot be thought apart from the epistemologies and ontologies that have circumscribed it. These plays with identity that often resist clear categorizations do not cleanly depart from the conventions and norms that we are thrown into. These ways of being do not simply call us to remain uncritical. Instead, they invite us to see the limitations of the category. In Kierkegaard’s terminology, at the limits of the ethical, emerges the realm of faith “which no thought can grasp because faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 82). Here, at the edge of the ethical, the drag performer, in his/her/their reiteration of the norms reveals the human that is captured by and at the same time exceeds our available discourses. This critical condition is something to be treasured.
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